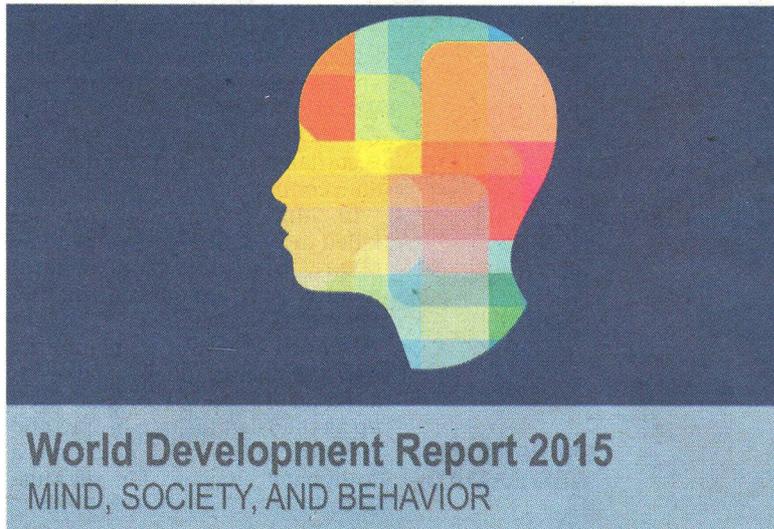


Remaining a moderate and progressive country



Dato' Steven Wong

AVOIDING SOCIAL ABYSS: *We need to rebuild a high trust society with the cool voice of reason, and avoid social divisiveness*



*The 2015. **World Development Report: Mind, Society, and Behaviour** shows how a **richer view of human behaviour** can help achieve development and provide new tools for interventions.*

It is often assumed that Malaysia, like other countries, only ever advances over time. The issue is simply "how fast" and "when", and not "if" or "whether". At the very worst, some Malaysians may be prepared to concede that there might be a standstill or a lack of progress.

Few would concede, at least not openly, that this country can also regress over time. Instead of moving towards better and brighter things, we may head in exactly the opposite direction. There may be some good reasons for this.

FIRST, it is a diehard mental habit. We humans are hardwired to survive and thrive, and we need to have an inherent sense of optimism for this to be the case.

SECOND, our society disapproves of negativism. We avoid those with messages of gloom and doom. Part of the reason is because of the above but also because it is against society's interests.

THIRD, the state - also read government's or your company's management - requires positive behaviour. Criticism is, therefore, not only frowned on but acted against by penalties, regulations and laws

No one likes critics, opponents or even whistleblowers. Yet, the true test of a civilised society is that it tolerates, not sues, harasses or arrests them. If one were absolutely objective, one sees that societies not only progress but also regress. Instead of constructive forward movement, they can also fall apart and quickly descend into social chaos.

Countries all around us today demonstrate this and need to be studied and explained. We need to know the factors that are responsible for decline, not least to avoid them. We cannot simply attribute the blame to this country or that for an "irresilience" that is of our own making.

This year's World Bank Development Report (WDR 2015) has the unique theme of "Mind, Society and Behaviour". Unlike previous issues, it delves into the role of psychology and other, social disciplines to point to the causes of development and poverty.

Humans, not surprisingly it turns out, do not always make thoughtful and rational decisions. They are not robots seeking to maximise profits alone. Rather, they are dictated by society's norms and modes of thinking, reinforced by their networks and surrounding environments.

As a result our choices are not necessarily logical or deliberate. They are made automatically and a result of our social, cultural and religious conditioning. (If this all seems academic, sweeping and irrelevant, the WDR 2015 has numerous examples where tiny innovations introduced have led to great changes in behaviour).

Social preferences and influences can, as stated at the outset, lead to highly desirable and mutually reinforcing outcomes but also "ill-advised" and destructive ones.

Two fundamental examples of the latter that the World Bank has found are, first, ethnic or racial segregation, and, second corruption. These two are extremely virulent, resistant to change and lead to a profound lack of trust. The latter, in turn, cause underdevelopment and poverty.

It does not take a genius to reverse the argument and conclude that where racial discrimination and corruption are in clear evidence, that the underlying social norms, influences and networks + are to blame. Does this hit home?, These insights are in no way new. They have been known for decades. Concepts and terminologies aside, they can be observed at street level by even the most formally uneducated.

What is critical, and here the World Bank simply states that further research is needed, is what one does about it. What can we do to prevent our striated, polarised and strife-ridden country from getting ever worse? How do we rebuild a high-trust society when racial and religious prejudice is rife?

The answers are not obvious. Anyone with an effective solution deserves the Nobel Peace Prize. We can look to the country's top political leadership. The chances are, however, that many are either reinforcing the negative social norms by abusing their powers or else not doing anything much about it.

The intelligentsia can often be a cool voice of reason. But many among the ranks are themselves perpetrators of social divisiveness and mistrust. This leaves the door to impassioned individuals to coalesce and give momentum for progressive social change, who are able to engineer a velvet or peaceful revolution.

Fortunately, Malaysia seems to have no lack of these in all strata of society. More have to join their ranks if we are to avoid the social abyss and remain a moderate and progressive country.

Dato' Steven Wong is deputy chief executive of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia